

Teenagers as Peer Persuaders and 10,000 Preventable Deaths: Sad Statistics

Each year young American drivers cause 10,000 deaths in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that of 330 children born in the United States on the day you read this, 1 will die and 4 will sustain serious or crippling injuries in an alcohol-related crash before they reach the age of 24. While the medical profession is using all of its genius and experience to *lengthen* the average lifespan of Americans, young people—through alcohol abuse—are literally snuffing out their own lives.

Americans between ages 15 and 24 have a higher death rate than 20 years ago, the only age group in the United States whose death rate has climbed rather than fallen in the last decade. The death rate of our young Americans is higher than that of their counterparts in Sweden, Great Britain, Japan, and Wales. Contributing to this tragic fact is the violence we see in homicides, suicides, and various types of accidents. But motor vehicle accidents are still the leading killers.

In the 1950s, there was a public consensus that a national emergency existed when 200 young Americans lost their lives because of poliomyelitis. When at the height of a poliomyelitis epidemic in 1952, 3,000 Americans succumbed to that disease, we activated our national scientific genius and rushed to develop a vaccine that has virtually eliminated poliomyelitis in the United States.

The existing epidemic of teenage alcohol abuse in our society is far harder to fight than poliomyelitis. No scientist can produce a vaccine that prevents young people from driving after they drink. There is no don't-drink-and-drive pill the taking of which compels young people to stay sober. There is no inoculation we can administer which immunizes young Americans against the tragic consequences of alcohol abuse. Our task is to *persuade*, to *convince*, and to *mobilize* all sectors of society in a continuing effort against a preventable public health problem.

I have pledged the resources of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to carry forward the Secretary's Teenage Alcohol Abuse Initiative. This program has already reached every region

of the country with news of carefully developed prevention approaches, including classroom education, teacher training, and parent education.

The successful 1982 regional prevention conferences for schools, parents, and community leaders will be followed by 15 regional treatment conferences in the fall of 1983 to help health care providers and community agencies assess the need for, and design, treatment services for youth who have fallen into trouble over use of alcohol.

But the centerpiece of the Department's Initiative was a national call to students themselves to enlist in the anti-drinking-and-driving army of concerned Americans. More than 300 students and their school superintendents from every State in the Nation joined in a national Conference for Youth on Drinking and Driving at the 4-H Center in Chevy Chase, Md., March 26–28, 1983. The conference was led by students, run by students, and featured school and community projects that students themselves have mounted in various sections of the country to persuade their peers not to drink and drive. The delegates returned home with action plans and resolve to work on prevention programs at their schools. A detailed report on the conference appears on pages 336–343 of this issue of *Public Health Reports*. We plan to make the national conference for youth an annual event to dramatically refresh the public's awareness of the heavy toll of drinking-driving. These yearly conferences will also encourage new student leaders to influence and lead their peers to safety and sense in the use of alcohol.

The tragic consequences of teenage alcohol abuse cry out for remedy. We want young and old alike to unite in a crusade of creative and constructive activity. The Departments of Transportation and Education joined the Department of Health and Human Services in sponsoring the 1983 youth conference. Corporations and private foundations provided funds for the students' travel and housing. I am confident that the dedication of America's students, themselves, combined with the concern and involvement of both the public and private sectors of our society, can create a powerful counterforce against teenage alcohol abuse.

Margaret M. Heckler
Secretary of Health and Human Services